

Plenty of Room at the Hotel Clovis

Can a New Mexico city save its old hotel?

By David Pike | Online Only | July 26, 2002

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Everything about the Hotel Clovis was grand, even its nickname: Skyscraper of the Plains. Soaring nine stories over the southeastern New Mexico city of Clovis, the hotel was once the tallest building between Albuquerque and Dallas.

Snubbing the Depression, the hotel operators opened the Clovis' elegant doors on October 20, 1931. Architect Robert Merrill combined art-deco exterior ornamentation with southwestern Indian motifs and tile work inside. Each of the 114 rooms had a modern bathroom with hot and cold running water, a telephone, and an overstuffed Murphy bed. The elevator was the first in southeastern New Mexico; the lower floor housed KICA, the first radio station in town; and the post-Prohibition ballroom welcomed Louis Armstrong, Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Hank Williams.

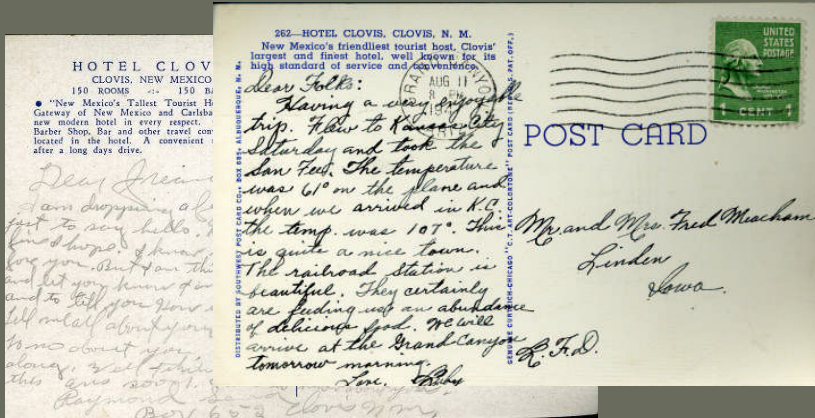
The opulent hotel inspired its share of lore, like the story about movie star Ronald Reagan, who waited in the lobby for a train instead of at the nearby depot. Or the one about a local cowboy named Jeff Goode, who one night rode his horse through the lobby, into the ballroom, then dismounted and punched a man waltzing with his wife.

"I ruined two knees dancing in that place," recalls Clovis City Commissioner Gloria Wicker. One recent afternoon, Wicker spent a few hours reviewing the hotel's old documents: the original blueprints, drafted on linen, not paper; a newspaper story announcing the opening of the hotel, next to the headline "Capone Seeks New Hearing"; and a ledger entry for July 3, 1982, documenting a one-night take of \$2,967.81.

Not long after that entry, the Santa Fe Railroad discontinued passenger trains to Clovis, and the hotel closed its doors. Neglect, dusty grassland winds, and vandals have since contributed to the demise of the roomy old hotel. Now it sits idle, abandoned, a monument to faded superlatives. "It's a tragedy that the hotel has been allowed to fall into the disrepair it has," Wicker says. "I want it back."

The Hotel Clovis once brought life to the town, and now Clovis, pop. 32,700, hopes to return the favor. In May 2000, the city launched a community-development effort to revitalize downtown, an undertaking that includes the hotel. Ideas abound: office space for the state government, a children's museum, a retirement home, low-income housing, or a very large bed-and-breakfast.

From the roof, though, the view of Clovis illustrates its history. Just across the street to the west is the Norm Petty Studio, where Buddy Holly and the Crickets recorded hits like "Peggy Sue" and "That'll Be the Day." To the south is the train station, once the lifeblood of the city, and to the north is the courthouse and a large carved stone tablet in the courtyard listing the Ten Commandments



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